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SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTRY DISCUSSES CHALLENGES FOR
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BY INDIGENOUS

REF: GUATEMALA 1352

¶1. (U) Summary: During a recent meeting with poloffs, senior Foreign Ministry officials discussed advances and challenges affecting Guatemala's multi-ethnic indigenous population. They underscored the GOG's commitment to human rights and its desire to facilitate exchanges with indigenous groups in other countries. They cited racism and machismo among serious societal obstacles to indigenous political participation, but expressed optimism for the coming of a "new dawn" and greater opportunities for indigenous peoples, including leadership from Winaq, a political movement created by 2007 presidential candidate Rigoberta Menchu. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Poloffs met with Vice Foreign Minister Lars Pira and Jose Francisco Cali Tzay, head of the newly established human rights office at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), to discuss advances and challenges on indigenous rights. Vice Minister Pira noted that Guatemala participated earlier this year in the UN Universal Periodic Review and that the MFA is reviewing the many recommendations from that review. He also pointed out that Guatemala has been very active in promoting the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at the OAS as well as in Geneva. The Guatemalan Ambassador to Norway heads the working group at the OAS, and a high-level inter-agency GOG committee meets frequently (most recently in November) to discuss human rights, including issues affecting Guatemala's indigenous population.

¶3. (U) Pira, who participated in the 4th "Foro del Arco del Pacifico Latinoamericano" Ministerial in Chile October 1-3, said that Chile seeks "horizontal cooperation" with Guatemala on human rights issues and a better understanding of how the indigenous population is organized in Guatemala. He commented on the importance of Guatemalans understanding the human rights situation in Chile and other countries and suggested that an exchange visit could be beneficial to both countries in understanding and addressing the common challenges they face. He stressed that the GOG would like to work closely with the Guatemalan indigenous community and facilitate bilateral relations with indigenous groups in other countries.

¶4. (SBU) Indigenous leader Cali Tzay discussed the numerous challenges facing Guatemala's indigenous population. He observed that unifying Guatemala's diverse, splintered indigenous population has been very difficult historically. He explained this difficulty as a reflection of the extensive division within Guatemalan society, which is represented by 20 political parties. He believed that political participation is becoming increasingly important and that 2012, which marks the end of a 52-year period (Katun) in the Mayan calendar, is the "beginning of a new dawn" that will

provide new opportunities to the indigenous. This "new dawn," however, would not be automatic but would require participation in the political process by indigenous peoples.

He rejected the belief held by some indigenous leaders that if you become part of the State you betray your own people because the State has traditionally been against indigenous peoples. In his view, the only way to change social injustice is to work inside the system and learn how the system functions. He pointed out that Guatemala has only one indigenous diplomat (the Ambassador in Norway), and urged the government to create a school to train indigenous leaders to become diplomats.

15. (SBU) On democracy, Cali Tzay said that elections are not necessarily a sign of democracy because voting is not automatic. He pointed out that citizens have to register to vote and that some live 20 hours or more from registration centers. While decentralization is enabling greater numbers of indigenous citizens to participate in the political process, the GOG has to facilitate the process. Cali Tzay pointed to Menchu's launching of her own political party as a positive sign that the democratic process is working, but commented that narcotrafficking, organized crime, and the climate of impunity pose serious threats to Guatemala's nascent democracy. He also cited racism and machismo as ongoing obstacles to political participation. He noted that just as in the U.S. where some voters did not believe Obama would make a good president because of his race, many people in Guatemala do not believe that an indigenous person, let alone a woman, would make a good president.

16. (SBU) Despite Guatemala's "very racist" society, Cali Tzay believes that Winaq, a political movement created in 2007 by former presidential candidate Rigoberta Menchu, represents an opportunity for greater indigenous participation in the

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political process. He warned, however, that if Winaq presents itself as a "Mayan group" or "indigenous group," people would view it as a racist platform and the movement would not get much support. Recalling that Menchu secured very few votes in her own home town in the 2007 presidential election, he encouraged Winaq to portray itself in a way to appeal to a broader audience, work more closely with the community, and change its attitude to demonstrate its leadership. He noted that none of the political parties, with the exception of the FRG, which strengthened Civil Defense Patrols under the rule of Rios Montt, and El Frente (the small party of former Foreign Minister Alfonso Cabrera which Cali Tzay believes will have little influence in the next presidential election), are working at the grassroots level.

17. (U) Cali Tzay emphasized that the GOG must demonstrate its will to respect human rights not only internationally but internally. He plans to use his international experience to advocate for human rights, including indigenous rights, through his new office at the MFA. (Note: Cali Tzay was re-elected this year to a second four-year term as the Guatemalan representative to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and elected vice president of CERD. End note.)

18. (U) Comment: Guatemala's 22 indigenous groups constitute an estimated 43-47 percent of Guatemala's population. They continue to face serious challenges, including limited access to basic health care and education in many areas of the country and limited representation in the national government. The creation of a high-level human rights office within the MFA and Cali Tzay's international experience and leadership will focus more attention on indigenous rights and other issues, including land issues, affecting Guatemala's diverse indigenous population.